DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 029 578 HE 000 730

By-Shiflett, James A.

Social Impact of New Directions in Art: "Soul," Living Theatre, Happenings, Etc.

American Association for Higher Education, Washington, D.C.
Pub Date 4 Mar 69
Note-6p.: Paper presented at the 24th National Conference on Higher Education, Chicago, Illinois, March 4, 1969
EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.40
Descriptors-•Curriculum Enrichment, •Individual Development, Music Techniques, •Perceptual Development, •Social Environment, Theater Arts, •Urban Culture, Urban Education

The basic assumption of the "new direction" in art is that US society treats persons as fragmented slivers of themselves and not as whole human beings, and its social impact is therefore a struggle to live. A happening is an experience that jerks one into the awareness of his environment. Living theater challenges the restrictions placed upon us by laws, taboos, and mores, and its impact should be to cause serious questioning about our lives. "Soul" is the poetry of the urban culture that tells of the misery, loneliness, agony, and joy of a people, and requires the body's participation in song such as the communication of the blues to an audience with "singing" body movements (called body gyrations by the uninitiated). The arts are saying that US society needs to be jerked (happening), questioned and defied (living theater), and given an experience of what it means to be a whole, feeling person (soul). The aim of education may be defined as the preparation of students to participate as full human beings in society, but the educational systems of our urban centers are not making real education possible. The drop-out rate in the cities is approaching 50% of the student population. The only alternative for the educational system would seem to be the experiential tools of the arts in the hard core curriculum, so that students may begin to sense their wholeness and urban society may experience what it means to be human. (WM)

ED029578

SHIFLETT, JAMES A.

SOCIAL IMPACT OF NEW DIRECTIONS IN ART: "SOUL, LIVING THEATRE, HAPPENINGS, ETC.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

HE 000 730

Section 18
Tuesday, March 4

# SOCIAL IMPACT OF NEW DIRECTIONS IN ART: "SOUL," LIVING THEATRE, HAPPENINGS, ETC.*

James A. Shiflett
Executive Director
Community Arts Foundation

There is a new genius striding the land. There is a life shouting in our canyon streets. There are people waking up at odd hours and poking heads out of windows and doors, recognizing brothers. The urban soul is stirring. For fifty years the mad scientist has been experimenting with the creation of the urban monster. He built its industrial heart and its military larynx. Surburban arms and legs appeared as if by magic. He stretched it along the waterways, across the great plains, through the swampland, until the nations of yesterday are called cities today. The United States city, the European city, the Japanese city, the Indian city, etc. By electrical impulses the heart was caused to beat, the larynx to speak, the arms and legs to move, but there was no heart, no soul.

The scientist thought to himself, "I must build a head that can move the body and order its life." He looked out on his creation for the material to build the head and his eye fell on the great urban bowels. They pleased him because of their uselessness and chaotic activity. Perfect for making the head. Attaching his jumper cables to the urban electrodes, he prepared to send a billion volts into the chaos, thus creating the nerve center ex nihil lo. The switch was pulled, the current flowed. The great bank of computers began to smoke, transistors exploded, the current backed up into the laboratory, the scientist stood transfixed------. Quiet voices coming up from the sparks and smoke. "Hey, man, you disturb my cool, you dig?" "Senor, you knocked my house down, man." "You all crazy baby, stop this foolin' around.", and the last voice, "you have a groovy place here, jack, but you're square." The scientist heard the ugly truth. The head already had life, it breathed, it thought, it felt. The head had soul. Could he turn over his body to the head? Could this head order the great complex machine that he had created? And why should he give up all of his work to a discourteous head that wouldn't even recognize him for all of his ingenious creation?

A battle of cosmic significance began. The head and the scientist arranged their forces. The head using soul power, the scientist using mechanical power. And the battle rages today. This is the agony of the United States and the world.

We come here for two hours to talk about the Social impact of new directions in art; "Soul", living theater, happenings, etc., as if we can withdraw and look objectively at subjective involvement. You cannot talk about soul, you recognize soul. Living Theater is not reviewed, it is experienced. Happenings are not analyzed, you are involved in them. The topic we have been given defines the "new direction" as participation and involvement with the aim of catharsis, receiving identity, and new direction. But first, the "new directions" all seek to reach the person, to uncover his soul, to give him his life, and the only way that this Gift can be given is for the giver to know his own person, to have received his own life.

---

*Paper presented to Section 18 at the 24th National Conference on Higher Education, sponsored by the American Association for Higher Education, Chicago, Tuesday morning, March 4. Permission to quote restricted.

When we talk about the Social impact of "new direction" in art, we are talking about the struggle to live. To live is to be aware that you are alive. A happening is an exercise in jerking you into awareness of your environment. It just so happens that a cellist runs into a ballerina at State and Madison at 12:00 o'clock noon. The cellist plays and the ballerina dances. The bus comes along. The ballerina gets on and rides away. The cellist walks into the subway. State and Madison will never be the same for those who passed by or stopped. The policeman present probably doesn't know if a law has been broken, and the newsstand vendor was entertained. A new awareness was established. A person's life changes because of one awareness-giving experience.

The Living Theater is best understood when Julian Beck and his company are experienced. In this experience, you are made to question every cliche that you have held sacred. They wander through the audience at the beginning of "Paradise Now", presenting the NO of our society, and crying in agony:

"I am not allowed to travel without a passport.

I am not allowed to smoke in the auditorium theater.

I am not allowed to smoke marijuana.

I am not allowed to spend my money for peace.

I am not allowed not to kill.

I am not allowed to burn my draft card.

I am not allowed to stay in the park after 11:00."

until finally, the cry.

"I am not allowed to take off my clothes-

and they take off their clothes. They cannot stand the agony of the negatives any longer. They will meet irrationality with a corresponding irrationality. But is it so irrational? Why does our society get nervous when one taboo is challenged? Because all of the taboos may be challenged and that would be anarchy. Anarchy is exactly what the Living Theater movement is preaching. They have a great evangelistic fervor. Destroy the system! The system is dead!

The impact the Living Theater should have upon the United States is to cause serious questioning about our life. It is difficult to build a case for the restrictions placed upon us by the laws and mores of our land being just for our welfare and safety. The anarchists have a point that the taboos are more for keeping the system alive than for keeping human beings alive. The educational system must hear the Living Theater's message, because you are a part of the System they speak of, and you are being challenged today as you have never been challenged before. You are on the battle line of the revolution, (or, you are on the battle line of urban life coming of age.)

When you come to "Soul", you come to a mystery. Here you have the poetry of the urban life, because it names the misery and the agony of our shared life. It comes out of the deeps of our existence. It comes out of the dumps of the political

machine's urban plantations. If the History of our day is written with perception it will tell how the great urban revolution became irreversible when it discovered the source of its soul, its life, the headwaters flowing from the polluted streets, alleys and rotting plaster apartments of our ghettos.

Bobby Bland sings, "Loan a Helping Hand"

Well, somebody, yes somebody,

Please, somebody, before I go insane,

Won't somebody,

Please lend me a helpin' hand?

I've got money, and I've got a place to stay

I've got money, and I've got a place to stay

But everybody needs a friend, both night and day.

Well, I walk, talk---but all by myself

Well, I walk, talk---but all by myself

I'm so afraid it's gonna wear me to death.

Well, somebody, yes somebody,

Please, somebody, oh, baby,

Please, somebody,

Won't you lend me a helpin' hand?

This song, and the blues in general, tap into the life root of a people. When they hear, they respond "Tell it like it is." Bobby Bland, Howlin Wolf, Red Fox, B.B. King, etc., are culture heroes not just of one eighth of our society, but of the emerging urban cultures. They sing of the misery, the loneliness, the joy of a people. They sing of human beings, and the urban culture must be a culture for human beings or we have no culture at all.

But Soul is more than words. It is also body. The soul body is the body that participates in living. If the body isn't present to the life situation, no amount of words will suffice. A person has to put his ego in his hips, thighs, toes, shoulders and hands. The culture-hero blues man sings with his whole body in response to words, audience, his own self. The uninitiated call his movements gyrations, but this term is false. He communicates his song with a singing body. The non-verbal is more important than the verbal because the soul's song, its believability, is lost without the body's presence to the song and the environment.

Therefore, the arts are saying that our society needs to be jerked (Happening), questioned and defied (living theater), and <u>given an experience of what it means to be a whole, feeling person (Soul)</u>. The basic assumption of the "new direction"

in art is that our society is not geared to treat human beings as whole persons, but as fragmented slivers of selves and therefore not human. If this assumption is true, then our society is immoral. If our society is immoral, then is it purposely so? If it is not purposely immoral then a jerking (Happening) into a consciousness of human wholeness will be sufficient. If it is purposely immoral, then it should and must be defied (living theater).

Because the art world does include Happenings (a passe form), living theater, and Soul, we must accept the fact that there are some who believe fervently that our society is immoral, that it purposely fragments and destroys human beings by "turning off" persons from their senses, feelings and imaginations, thereby creating rational robots. This cry was voiced by the University of Chicago protesters. A spokesman of this demonstration said the University student body and faculty are too rationally inclined to actually make the demonstration a success. One of the things this spokesman meant was that the students and faculty were cut off from their bodies. There was not enough feeling feeding the rational. They (the demonstrators) were unable to act as persons who had experienced being human beings, and they claimed the University was responsible.

Let me assume that most of you are not inclined to the students or the "new direction arts" action stance, but you sympathize with their point of view. Perhaps you would deny that there is a conscious plot to dehumanize men. Consequently your position is that we need changes in our educational system to make it possible for teachers to meet the educational needs required by today's society. You define the aim of education to be the preparation of a person to participate as a full human being in our society. Traditionally being idealists, you believe that our society desires persons to participate as full human beings in its life, and that this participation will make for a strong, healthy society. You recognize that the problem in education is to keep the student open to or connected to the tools of his personhood; sight, hearing, tastes, touch and smell. His senses give him his awareness and his desire to assimilate. If a person is not aware of himself and that which is around him, he is slow to learn and he may not even learn.

The traditional awareness tools in education have been in the past the paddle and the arts. A person is discovered by fear in the paddle syndrome, and by his experience in the arts world. Indeed, one behavioral scientist refers to certain arts processes in theater, writing and music as experiential pedagogical processes, and that these experiential processes must be placed in the hard curriculum of our educational process if our children are to learn.

The social implication of the new direction in art and the arts experiential processes (e.g., the Theater Games Workshop of Viola Spolim, the Story Workshop writing process of John Schultz and the music experimentation of William Russo), say to us that there must be a union between the arts and the teaching of English, History, Social Science, Mathematics, Languages, etc. if we are serious about education being a process in which the student is discovered by himself and his environment.

Therefore, those who say that they do not notice a lack of educational curiosity on the part of college students, that they seem to be able to learn and that they seem to be reasonably well integrated human beings, must be aware of two answers to their position. First, the student revolts, if one reads between the lines of our newspapers, is saying that this attitude is a lie, and that students are interested in participating in an educational process that has as its main concern their humanization. Second, our colleges never see one half of the students from our urban society that could come to college, because the public school teachers that are being cranked out of our colleges and universities do not have the tools to teach the children of this decade. They are turning off our children,

and the educational systems of our urban centers, directly connected to the educational Ph.D.'s of our universities, are not willing to make the necessary decisions that will make real education possible in our urban centers. (This statement is the subject for another paper).

At a particular public high school in Chicago, the student body numbers 2400. If you divide 2400 by four classes then each class should be 600 apiece. But the graduating class numbers only 325. This means that the other classes are bigger than 600. You conclude after a series of mathematical computations that the Freshman class needs to be about 800 in order to produce a 325 graduating Senior class.

Given the normal attrition is it normal for a class during four years of school to decrease by close to 60 per cent? It is not. The drop-out rate in our urban centers is fast approaching 50 per cent of the student population. When we reach the 50 per cent mark and pass through it, the educational system can no longer claim to be the educational system.

The dropout of the sixties is a living art form that combines the jerk of the happening and the questioning and defiance of the living theater in regard to Education. We are on the edge of anarchy in our educational system. Our only hope is the embracing of Soul, of involvement by community and student in the educational process, in the decision making committees and boards that are presently making decisions for an educational system that will soon have no students. The curriculum must be changed to include and inaugurate the experiential tools of the arts in the hard core curriculum so that students will begin to sense their wholeness. (I refer you to the "Artist in Residence Program" conducted by the Community Arts Foundation at Waller High School, 2001 N. Orchard, in Chicago, and financed by the Illinois Arts Council and the Oscar Mayer Foundation.)

The cosmic battle continues. The struggle for the head of the monster rages. The voices coming out of the urban mix are aware that they are being manipulated by unfeeling forces, and they resent it. The "new direction" for the arts are both the vehicle that freights the voices into the hearing of wholly unfeeling structures, and the source for an emerging urban society to cope with what it means to be human. Urban society can be an environment for humanness or it can be the context for a new breed of urban robot. We can make the decision that will determine what our environment will contain.